

The shoot-out at Rue Grange aux Belles, 1924



A short account of the incident that signalled a major rift between the Communist Party and the anarchists in France.

If anything acted as a marker for the utter rift between the anarchists and Communists in France it was the killings at the Rue Grange aux Belles on 11th January 1924. Up to then anarchists and Communists (as well as "pure" syndicalists) had worked together in the CGTU (Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire) which had been a split from the CGT itself in 1922 when revolutionaries had been expelled by a CGT leadership which had collaborated with the war efforts of the Allies.

The Maison des Syndicats at 33 Rue Grange aux Belles had been used as a [CGU](#) centre since 1905, and was bought outright for it with money inherited by Robert Louzon in 1907. A print shop had been installed there and Pierre Monatte worked there as a proofreader. It also later served as a seat for the Ligue Antimilitariste. During WWI it served as the assembly point for the radical minorities in the different unions of the CGT opposed to the war. An anarchist conference was held there in 1909 and it was to host two congresses of the Communist Party in 1921 and 1922 (the latter was attended by the future Ho Chi Minh).

Since the CGT conference in September 1922 in Saint Etienne, Communists on one side and anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary syndicalists (the last grouped around the magazine *La Vie Ouvrière*) on the other had cohabited uneasily within the CGT. The anarchists had been forced on to a back foot at the founding congress of the CGTU where the Communists and the Vie Ouvrière group had formed an alliance. During the second part of 1922 and all of 1923 differences had mounted over the [Russian question](#). The anarchists had reported on the repression of anarchists and other revolutionaries in Soviet Russia and then on the crushing of the [Kronstadt revolt](#). *Le Libertaire*, the anarchist paper which had become a daily in December 1923 always took the side of the libertarian minority in the CGTU. On the eve of the CGTU extraordinary conference in 1923, they had published the pamphlet *The Repression of Anarchism in Soviet Russia* (see the [libcom biography of Volin](#)).



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The libertarians became very concerned about the takeover of the syndicalist movement by the Communists. The building of Communist power within the CGTU was reinforced by its membership of the Red International of Labour Unions, controlled by Moscow. The extraordinary congress was a tense affair and from then on the Communists accelerated a campaign of defamation and slander against the libertarian minority. Inside the CGTU, the anarchist railway worker Pierre Besnard sounded an alarm call in *Le Libertaire* on 14th July 1922: “*Syndicalism is in danger!*” He created the Comité de Défense Syndicaliste (CDS) inside the CGTU to fight against Communist domination. (However he did not win over all the anarchists within the CGTU. Some refused to join this committee and within the committee itself other anarchists like Louis Lecoin and Colomer argued for the maintenance of unity within the CGTU.)

On January 11th the Communist Party held an electoral meeting in the building on the rising cost of living and the actions of the German government. It was addressed by “Captain”

Albert Treint, the general secretary of the Party. The fact that an electoral meeting was being held in a hall that had traditionally been a centre of anti-parliamentarism and this was a red rag to the libertarians. They had already protested against the use of the building by a political party. *Le Libertaire* encouraged its readers to make an intervention at the meeting in its issue of the previous day.

Three thousand people attended the meeting, with 300 libertarians sitting on the left side of the hall. Leaders of the Communist Party and of the Secours Rouge International addressed the meeting, one after the other. Marthe Bigot, a leading light within both the Party and the CGTU spoke and was interrupted by an anarchist who called out "*Syndicalism is not your business!*" Marcel Cachin, another Party leader and director of *L'Humanité*, the Party paper, attempted to restore calm. On the contrary the fracas became worse and fist fights broke out.

Julien Le Pen, the secretary of the electricians union, cut the current in the hall in an attempt to stop the fighting. Henri Reynaud, another Party member and CGTU leader put the lighting back on, in the process making sure that the fighting continued. Treint mounted the podium and began a vicious diatribe against anarcho-syndicalism, which further enflamed the situation. The anarchists hurled insults at him about his past as a professional soldier and his militaristic authoritarianism, and his daily insults *in L'Humanité* against anarchism.

The Communist security corps intervened for the first time, attacking libertarians who were attempting to reach the podium. Treint ordered this group led by the ex-soldier Georges Beaugrand to act energetically.

The anarchist May Picqueray described the event in her memoirs:

"At the entrance, I met Bernard, secretary of the union of glove makers. He was wearing his big black hat and cape. He was no longer very young, in his sixties? Impossible to say.

"Captain" Treint vents his bile and violently attacks the anarcho-syndicalists. Suddenly a voice rises from the back of the room near the stage... "Long live anarcho-syndicalism"

followed almost immediately by a cry for help: "To me, mates!"

This was Jules Boudoux, (real name Sellenet), anarchist and secretary of the carpenters'

union, one of the principal animators of the CGTU minority, who was being attacked by the Communist security corps. May and Bernard rushed to the scene, set up a barricade of chairs and confronted the security corps who were armed with sticks. May took off her leather belt and wrapped it around her hand and

joined in the fighting. " *Beside me, a big guy dressed in corduroy and wearing a cap started using his fists*" (Picqueray).

Suddenly Treint ordered the retreat of the security corps who returned to the podium. They then apparently opened fire with revolvers on the libertarians. Adrien Poncet ("*Whom we called "the plumber"*" - Picqueray) member of the Union Anarchiste and on its commission

for organisation and in the building workers' union, collapsed and May Picqueray opened his jacket to discover that he had been shot twice in the stomach. Nicolas Clos (wrongly named as Clot by Picqueray , "*a big boy in a cap*"- as she described him) a member of the minority within the metal workers union rushed towards the podium and was shot by a bullet that passed through the cap and through his skull. Others were injured including Charlot, the caretaker of the hall and an ex-carpenter. He was already limping from a work accident and was now wounded in the thigh. Boudoux was hit in the throat by a bullet that passed through, narrowly escaping death. Both Poncet (a false name according to May Picqueray for a militant dodging the draft) and Clos died on their way to hospital.

Meanwhile Treint and his security goons had fled the hall, avoiding the arrival of the police.

The next day, *L'Humanité* accused the anarchists of coming to the hall to break up the meeting and that they were carrying revolvers and that they had initiated the shooting.

Unfortunately for the Communists, evidence proved that the only bullet holes were in the wall on the left side of the hall, where the anarchist minority were sitting, and were all at breast height.

The anarchists present refused to name names of their assailants to the police when interrogated. Various witnesses of the shooting gave evidence of who had fired the shots and from where in the pages of *Le Libertaire* and *Le Peuple*, the paper of the CGT. Again, the actual names of the killers were suppressed in *Le Libertaire*. It was only later that one of the killers' names was revealed. In 1929 Julien Le Pen and Albert Guigui (see the licom biography of Albert Guigui-Theral), anarchists and activists within the CGT, and victims of a Communist campaign, named Gabriel Ducoeur, Communist and rail workers leader, with a

reputation for gratuitous violence during World War One, as one of the murderers.

The Communist Party sent an emissary to Clos's widow after his death, promising a sumptuous funeral. The funeral itself was attended by three thousand, where the widow testified that Clos had been a Party member (contradicted by many other friends). As a result the Communist Party attracted very few to Clos's actual burial.

War had now commenced within the French workers' movement. From 1927 the Communist Party security forces began to wear blue berets with a red star and to openly wield truncheons.

Two Italians who had witnessed the shootings were to write in *Le Libertaire* on October 18th 1924 remarked that the event had

“profoundly saddened and made a great impression on the proletariat of all countries, for this sinister and ominous event was not the result of a fight between subversives and the police, but represented something tragically new in the history of the international proletariat.

Brother had killed brother” (Quoted in Berry)

The CGTU under pressure from anarchists in its ranks set up a commission of enquiry into the killings. The findings, on the advice of the Communist majority on the commission, were never published.

Besnard and his associates broke away from the CGT and founded the CGT-Syndicaliste Revolutionnaire (CGT-SR) in 1926. The majority of the anarchist specific organisation the Union Anarchiste (UA) were not prepared to follow Besnard into this minority revolutionary union, (which gathered together about 4,000 members), remaining in the CGTU or even in the CGT. Not only had the Grange aux Belles incident acted as a catalyst for a rift between the Communists and the anarchists, it had also opened up a rift in anarchist ranks.

Nick Heath

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